DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 939 **IR 007 226**

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TITLE	The Accident. Parenting Styles: Avoiding the Extremes. Student Guide--Footsteps. Report Number 13.
INSTITUTION	Applied Management Sciences, Inc., Silver Spring, Md.; Educational Film Center, Springfield, Va.; Maryland Univ., College Park. Inst. for Child Study.
SPONS AGENCY	Bureau of School Systems (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	79
NOTE	17p.; For related documents, see IR 007 212-233 and IR 007 396; Best copy available
AVAILABLE FROM	University Park Press, 233 East Redwood Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21202 (Student Guide Kit, one of each program, 1-20, $5.95 per kit); Reference Section, National Audiovisual Center, General Services Administration, Washington, D.C. 20409 (Films and tapes only)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Child Development; Childhood Interests; *Child Rearing; Early Childhood; *Educational Television; Family Life Education; Family Relationship; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parenthood Education; Parent Responsibility

ABSTRACT

This student guide for a program on styles in parenting discusses how attitudes toward childrearing have changed over the past 50 years, how children are affected by some extreme approaches to childrearing, and how a parenting style that is neither overpermissive nor overprotective is most likely to enhance children's growth. Designed around a magazine format to allow maximum flexibility to different groups using the materials, the guide is divided into seven sections: (1) an overview of the theme and contents; (2) a summary of the major learnings of the theme; (3) feature articles containing the major content and including practical suggestions for parents; (4) a film review section which includes a synopsis of the accompanying film program and a related discussion question; (5) three activities aimed at both individual and group participation; (6) a selection of field activities, discussion questions, and research topics designed to reinforce the ideas presented in the articles and meet the needs of a wide variety of classroom groups; and (7) a bibliography for further reading on the theme. (Author/JEG)

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PARENTING STYLES: AVOIDING THE EXTREMES

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The Accident

Student Guide

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footsteps

A world to be born under your footsteps...
St.-John Perse

FROM THE EDITORS

Styles in parenting are in a state of flux. Things our parents and grandparents took for granted seem unclear and uncertain to many of us. Parents may raise their own children one way, but see and hear about many other approaches in the homes of friends, on TV, in books and magazines, and in classrooms and parent groups.
No wonder many parents are confused.

In this booklet you will learn how attitudes toward childrearing have changed over the past 50 years. You will read about how children are affected by some extreme approaches to childrearing. You will learn how in parenting, as in many other areas, moderation is the best rule.

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THE BIG IDEAS

Children need to be permitted to explore the world and move about freely.

Children also need to be protected from hurting themselves and other people.

A parenting style that strikes a balance — in other words, that is neither overpermissive nor overprotective — is most likely to enhance children's growth.

Be not too zealous;
moderation is best in all things.
— *Theognis*

FINDING A BALANCE

Sometimes scales bounce up and down before they settle around the center. This search for balance has also been true of our attitudes toward children and our approach to raising them.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, children were seen as lumps of clay to be molded into a certain shape. The parent's role was to instill proper habits in children. Thumb-sucking was prevented by pinning children's sleeves over their fingers. Feeding was done strictly on schedule.

This was the Victorian Age — the heyday of "spare the rod and spoil the child" and "children should be seen and not heard." The parent's word was law, and children were not even allowed to question it.

Not much was known about children's developmental needs. Individual differences were totally ignored. Psychologist John Watson and others told parents that there was only one sensible way to raise children:

Treat them as though they were young adults.

THE PENDULUM SHIFTS

Then, as our knowledge about children began to grow, our attitude toward them began to soften. We learned how the bodies and minds of children are different from those of adults. We no longer saw the child as a miniature adult. We realized that children cannot be forced to live by adult standards so early in life without doing them damage.

Parents were encouraged to be more permissive and to give children room to grow. Life at home and at school became less regimented.

But, as often happens when a sudden change in attitude takes place, some parents overreacted. They tried to make up for past mistakes by adopting an "anything goes" attitude toward their children. These parents looked on children as wildflowers who needed complete freedom to grow. They believed that if they set any limits, they would frustrate children and inhibit their growth. These parents gave their children more freedom than they could handle.

SHIFTING STYLES

It soon became obvious that a total lack of limits was as harmful to children as too many. In the name of permissiveness, some parents gave up responsibility for their children. People began to blame permisiveness for all the problems of youth — from dirty feet to drug abuse.

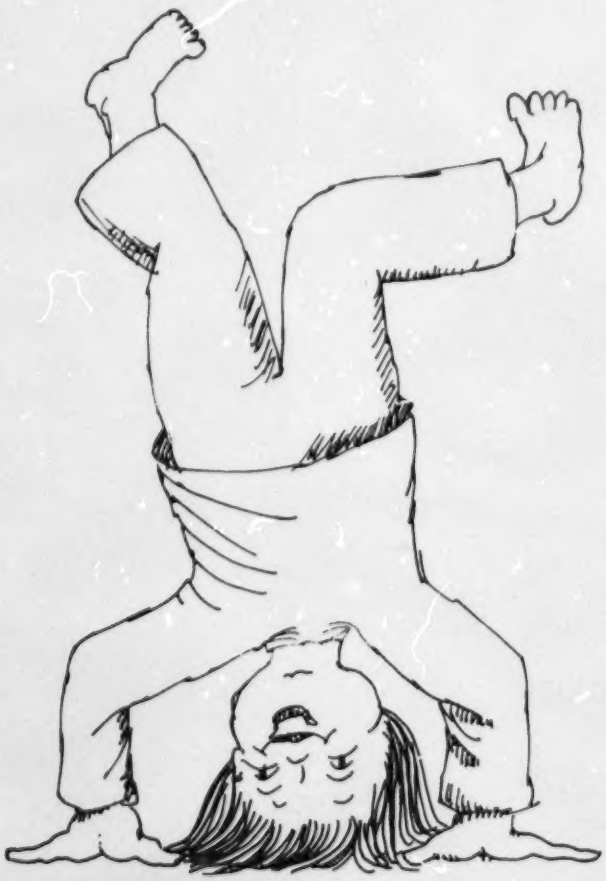
When faced with the new ideas about children, other parents clung stubbornly to the old ways. "What was good enough for me is good enough for my children" was the motto of these people.

And many people were just plain confused. Many doubts were raised in their minds — doubts such as:

Am I being too strict with my kids?	OR	Do I let them get away with too much?
Should I be less protective of my son?	OR	Will he get hurt if I don't keep a firm grip on him?

Even today, many parents — experienced as well as new — don't feel completely comfortable about how they are raising their children.

Our past experience and present knowledge, however, show that choosing an effective parenting style is not a question of "either/or." It is a matter of finding a comfortable balance. We know now that children need to be *both* permitted and protected — but not too much.



PIONEERS IN PERMISSIVENESS

Many people contributed to this century's attitude toward children, including: psychologist **Sigmund Freud**; educator **John Dewey**; pediatrician **Arnold Gesell**; and anthropologists **Margaret Mead** and **Ruth Benedict**. One person who popularized many of the new notions has become known in almost every household — **Dr. Benjamin Spock**.

Dr. Spock's manual on *Baby and Child Care* has probably influenced more parents than any other book on child care. Many people swear by him. Others swear at him. They accuse Dr. Spock of overpermissiveness. Public figures like Spiro Agnew have even blamed him for the opposition of young people to the Vietnam War.

In the first edition of *Baby and Child Care* (1946), Dr. Spock spoke out against the strict practices of infant feeding that existed at the time. It was believed then that babies should be fed every 4 hours, on the dot — no matter how hard they cried. Dr. Spock recommended that parents take into account the differences among children. He advised parents to set up feeding times based on those differences.

In the second edition of his book (1957), Dr. Spock tried to help parents who were confused by the new permissiveness. He explained that children still needed the firm leadership of their parents.

Today, in the 1976 edition of *Baby and Child Care*, Dr. Spock says that:

. . . strictness or permissiveness is not the real issue. Good-hearted parents who aren't afraid to be firm when it is necessary can get good results with either moderate strictness or moderate permissiveness. On the other hand, a permissiveness that comes from harsh feelings or a permissiveness that is timid or vacillating can each lead to poor results. The real issue is what spirit the parent puts into managing the child and what attitude is engendered in the child as a result.

HOW HAVE DR. SPOCK'S ATTITUDES CHANGED OVER THE YEARS? IS HE OVERPERMISSIVE?

THE CASE FOR PERMISSIVENESS . . .

CHILDREN NEED FREEDOM.

They need to be permitted — even encouraged — to:

explore the world
use their senses
move about freely
make mistakes.

Opportunities such as these give children freedom to grow in all areas.

Children need to run, jump, climb and skip. Sometimes parents worry that children are climbing too high or running too fast. But children are pretty quick to learn how to care for their own safety. They are adventurous but cautious. By letting children trust their own bodies and perceptions, parents help keep them safe.

Children also need to make choices, take on responsibility, freely express their ideas and wishes — even say "no" now and then. When parents permit children to do things for themselves — even when parents could do it better or faster — they help children most.

PERMISSIVENESS IS GIVING CHILDREN THE FREEDOM THEY NEED TO GROW WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF SAFETY AND REGARD FOR OTHERS.

TOO MUCH FREEDOM OVERWHELMS CHILDREN.

Children do not need the freedom to:

destroy property
act on all their impulses
hurt themselves or others
give up trying.

This is no longer permissiveness. This is indulgence.

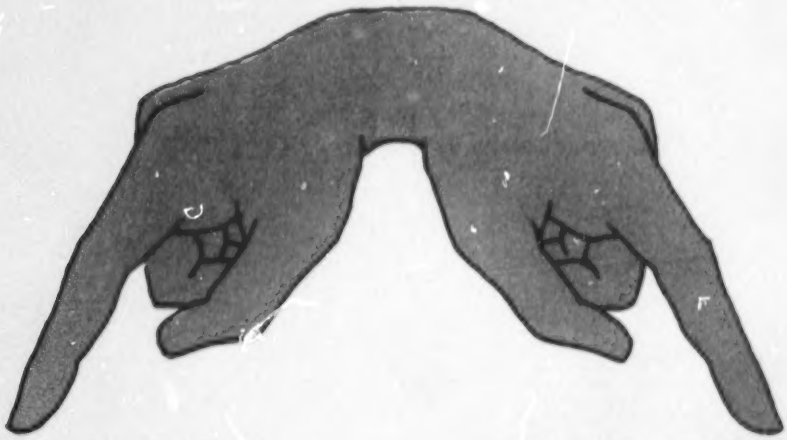
When parents let children do anything they want, children feel abandoned. They think their parents don't care what happens to them. Overpermissiveness is frightening to children. It's scary to think that no one will stop you if you get out of control.

Such indulged children often become self-centered. They have trouble getting along with others, because they are used to having things their own way. Nothing pleases them.

Parents may be overpermissive for different reasons. Some may fear their children won't love them if they say "no." Some may want their children to do all the things they were never able to do. In any case, parents are kinder to their children, and their children respect them more, when they set and enforce some limits.

FREEDOM DOES NOT MEAN LICENSE.

. . . AND THE CASE FOR PROTECTIVENESS



CHILDREN NEED LIMITS.

They want:
guidance
advice
regularity
routine.

When parents protect their children from hurting themselves and others, parents help children feel secure.

Children are vulnerable to accidents. They need to be protected from serious falls, cuts, and bumps. They need an environment — both indoors and out — that is safe to explore.

Children also need clear guidelines for behavior. They need help controlling their impulses. By setting limits, parents say to children: You don't have to be afraid of going too far. I won't let you get hurt.

Children also need to learn which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Without this knowledge, they are ill-prepared for life in the real world. They have trouble adjusting to society.

PROTECTION IS SETTING REASONABLE RULES FOR CHILDREN'S SAFETY AND BEHAVIOR.

TOO MANY LIMITS SMOTHER CHILDREN.

Children do not need to be:
overdirected
overstructured
told how to do everything
shown how to to do everything.

Such restrictions interfere with children's growth.

When parents hold onto children too tightly, they may save them from physical harm, but harm their spirit. Children cannot be shielded from all harm. And sometimes they have to learn the painful way. If parents never let children develop a sense of danger, children are more likely to get hurt when their parents are not around.

If parents do everything for a child, what will the child do later on when there is no one around? The child will never have a chance to become competent or independent.

Overprotective parents may be overly concerned about their children's welfare. Or they may think children just can't do things for themselves. In any case:

PROTECTION DOES NOT MEAN IMPRISONMENT.

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STAYING ON BALANCE

Fortunately, children thrive under many different styles of parenting. Parents can choose a style based on what is best for them and their children.

All parents have different personalities and life styles. Some are more easy-going, some more strict. Some are comfortable raising their children in ways that would make others squirm.

In the same way, some children can handle more freedom than others. Some children need to be held by tighter reins; some need more slack. As children grow older and become more responsible, parents can gradually let out the reins. Some things that cannot be permitted at 2 can be permitted at 5.

And some situations call for more control than others. There are some situations where parents cannot be flexible. They cannot allow children to hurt themselves or others, for example, or to commit an illegal act. In other special situations — such as moving, illness, death or divorce — parents may be more permissive.

At any rate, there are few absolutes when it comes to parenting styles. There is no magic set of limits that's good for the child — just these general guidelines:

GIVE CHILDREN PERMISSION TO GROW AND PROTECTION FROM HARM.

Children need strong parents who are actively involved in their lives, but who respect children's freedom and dignity.

STAY AWAY FROM THE EXTREMES OF OVERPROTECTION AND OVERPERMISSIVENESS.

Neither extreme is in the best interests of the child. Either one can lead to resentment, hostility, and even delinquent behavior.

Just where parents are between the extremes is not of major importance. What is important is that their style of parenting be reasonable and motivated by love and respect for the child. Between the extremes are many approaches that make room both for the parent's sanity and the child's growth.

A BALANCING ACT

Steering a clear course between being too indulgent and too restrictive is usually a matter of common sense. Each situation below describes one approach that is clearly too permissive, one that is too protective, and one that strikes a balance between the two extremes.

SITUATION: YOUR 9-MONTH-OLD IS AT THE STAGE WHERE SHE'S INTO EVERYTHING.

Too Protective		Too Permissive
You keep her in a playpen all the time.	You remove breakable and dangerous items from certain areas of your home and let her crawl about there, keeping an eye out just in case.	You let her crawl around everywhere on her own.

SITUATION: YOUR 2-YEAR-OLD WANTS TO LEARN HOW TO TIE HIS SHOELACES BY HIMSELF.

Too Protective		Too Permissive
You let him, but at the first sign of a mistake, you stop him and show him how to do it right.	You let him do as much as he wants to do by himself. If the laces end up wrong, you praise him for his efforts and show him how to tie them even better.	You leave him to figure it out by himself, and let him go to school tripping over his shoelaces.

SITUATION: YOUR 3-YEAR-OLD STARTS TO QUARREL WITH HIS BEST FRIEND.

Too Protective		Too Permissive
At the first sign of a disagreement, you intervene, separate the children, and send the friend home.	When you hear the children arguing, you stand by to see if they can resolve their disagreement without force. If they start hitting each other, you quickly put a stop to their fighting and help them talk things out.	You leave them to solve things themselves, even when it turns into a fist fight in which one child is clearly the loser.

SITUATION: YOUR 5-YEAR-OLD WANTS TO CHOOSE HIS OWN CLOTHES AND DRESS HIMSELF FOR SCHOOL.

Too Protective		Too Permissive
You insist on choosing his clothes and dressing him to save time and make sure he gets everything right.	You give him a choice of 2 or 3 items each day, and leave plenty of time for him to dress himself — standing by to help if he wants it.	You let him wear anything he wants even if it's inappropriate, and leave him to dress himself, even if his shirt is inside out and his shoes on the wrong feet.

FILM REVIEW SECTION

The Accident

While Bob Hornbrenner is taking care of his daughter, April, she has a bad fall from a merry-go-round at the playground. Bob and his mother rush April to the hospital for tests. Once Bob finds out that April is out of danger, he calls his ex-wife, Sheila.

Sheila is alarmed by April's accident. She blames Bob for being overpermissive with their daughter. Bob is as upset as Sheila over what has happened, but doesn't think the accident was caused by being overpermissive. In fact, Bob thinks that if anyone has a bad parenting style, it is Sheila. From his observations, Sheila is far too protective of April. Once April comes home from the hospital, Bob and Sheila continue their discussion of who has the better parenting style.

WHY DOES BOB THINK THAT SHEILA IS TOO PROTECTIVE OF APRIL?

WHY DOES SHEILA THINK THAT BOB IS TOO PERMISSIVE WITH APRIL?

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ACTIVITY PAGES

activity #1
DEAR MOM

Your mother has just spent the weekend visiting you and your family. A few days later you receive a letter from her. After thanking you for your hospitality, she expresses some concern that you and your spouse are too permissive with your children. She seems especially upset by the way you let the children participate in the making of family decisions. "That would never have happened in my day," she writes.

HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND TO YOUR MOTHER'S COMMENT IN YOUR RETURN LETTER?

activity #2
A STYLE WITH STYLE

Think of a parent whose style of parenting you admire. Write a profile of this parent describing:

- what you admire about the parent's style
- how the parent's childrearing habits affect his or her children
- how this parent's style is similar to or differs from the way in which you were raised.

activity #3
AN EXTREME SITUATION

Here are three different situations. For each one, describe an approach that is too permissive, one that is too protective, and one that is between the two extremes (see box on page 9).

SITUATION: YOUR 3-YEAR-OLD WANTS TO GO ON THE PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT BY HIMSELF.

SITUATION: YOUR 3-YEAR-OLD GETS HUNGRY BETWEEN MEALS SOMETIMES.

SITUATION: YOUR 5-YEAR-OLD HATES TO GO TO BED.

GRAB BAG

to do

1. Observe parents with their children in stores, parks, playgrounds, and other public places:
   - What do they do to protect their children from harm?
   - What do they do to permit them to grow?
   - Are some parents overprotective or overpermissive, in your opinion?
   - What would you have done in each case?

   Share your observations with your classmates.
2. Talk to your parents, grandparents and other adults about childrearing practices over the years:
   - How were they raised?
   - How have attitudes and practices changed since that time?
   - How did they decide on their own style of childrearing?
3. Take a poll among the students in your school to find out their feelings about the way their parents brought them up:
   - How many feel their parents were too strict?
   - How many feel their parents were too lenient?
   - How many feel their parents struck a good balance?

to discuss

1. Are childrearing theories just fads? Is the pendulum likely to swing back at any time to a more restrictive attitude toward raising children? Why or why not?
2. How do you feel about how you were raised? Do you think your parents were too strict? Too lenient?
3. Besides overprotection and overpermissiveness, what are some other extremes that parents should stay away from?
4. Were you ever in a situation where you didn't know the rules or the limits? How did you feel? How do you think a child with too much freedom might feel?
5. Are parents more protective of some children than others — for example, girls, first-born children, children with handicaps, or seriously ill children more than others? In each case, should they be?
6. What if two parents have different styles of parenting. How do they resolve their differences? Is it important that their styles be consistent? Will they complement or contradict each other?
7. Are certain styles of parenting associated with certain cultural groups — for example, protectiveness with Jewish families, strictness with Black families, permissiveness with middle income families? Are these stereotypes true or false? How have they come about?

to research

1. How childrearing practices have changed during this century. A good way to trace these changes is to go through some of the back issues of *Infant Care*, a U.S. Government publication first issued in 1914.
2. People who have influenced our attitudes toward children during this century. For example, read about the work of: John Watson; Benjamin Spock; Margaret Mead; and Arnold Gesell.
3. Diana Baumrind's writings on the difference between authoritarian and authoritative parents.
4. The relationship between overprotectiveness or overpermissiveness and self-esteem.

BOOK BROWSING

Here are some books that contain more information on:

...permissiveness and protectiveness

Baby and Child Care. Dr. Benjamin Spock. New York: Pocket Books, 1976. (paperback)

Black Child Care. James P. Comer, M.D., and Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D. New York: Pocket Books, 1975. (paperback)

Your Child's Self-Esteem. Dorothy Corkville Briggs. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1970. (paperback)

...the history of childrearing habits and attitudes toward children

Centuries of Childhood. Philippe Aries. New York: Vintage Books, 1962. (paperback)

Childhood and History in America. Glenn Davis. New York: Psychohistory Press, 1976.

History of Childhood. Lloyd deMause, ed. New York: Psychohistory Press, 1976.

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FOOTSTEPS was developed by a consortium of:

Applied Management Sciences
Silver Spring, Maryland

Educational Film Center
Springfield, Virginia

Institute for Child Study of the University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
Many people — staff, students, teachers and parents — contributed to the development of these materials. Two people in particular, however, deserve special recognition and thanks: Sharon McIntyre, for her tireless efforts field testing the materials; and June Hamning, for patiently typing — and retyping — these pages.

We also wish to gratefully acknowledge the ongoing support of the Division of Educational Technology, U.S. Office of Education, without whose assistance these materials would not be possible.

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Published by
University Park Press
International Publishers in Science, Medicine, and Education
233 East Redwood Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

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